Rare Audio Recording of Fairbury Sailor During World War II

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Raymond Leslie Bess (1924-2011) grew up in Fairbury and served in the U.S. Navy in the Pacific during World War II. While he was in the Navy, a military reporter interviewed him, and a 78 RPM vinyl record was made with this interview. One of these vinyl records was recently discovered, and the audio interview has now been permanently preserved as a digital file.

The story of the Bess family began with the birth of John Henry Bess in 1868 at Lutesville in Bollinger County, Missouri. This county is about 90 miles southwest of Carbondale, Illinois. In 1891, John H. Bess married Ida Oralene Shell at Lutesville. He was 23, and she was 19 when they married. They had five children. John H. Bess taught school for many years. In 1898, one of their five children, Ernest Rosewell Bess, was born in Lutesville.

In 1902, the John and Ida Bess family moved from Missouri to Illinois. John H. Bess farmed east of Fairbury and later operated a service station in Rantoul. When the family moved to Illinois, Ernest R. Bess was four years old.

Mr. and Mrs. John Bess lived in the Chatsworth, Fairbury, and Forrest area after 1947. In 1957, John H. Bess died in Fairbury at the age of 89 and was buried at Graceland Cemetery. In 1959, Ida Bess died in Fairbury at the age of 87. She was buried with her husband in Graceland.

In 1919, Ernest Bess, son of John and Ida Bess, married Helen Snyder. He was 21, and she was 18 when they married. They had seven children. These children included Wilma Bess (1919-1992), Willard Bess (1921-1986), Raymond Bess (1924-2011), Eula Mae Bess (1926-2006), Howard Bess (1928-2023), Lois Bess (1930-2014), and Evelyn Bess (1931-1976).

Unfortunately, Helen Bess, the wife of Ernest Bess, died at the age of 46 in 1947. Ernest Bess then married Bernice Conger in 1951 in Fairbury. Ernest Bess owned and operated the first Shell service station in Fairbury at the corner of Oak and Seventh Streets. He later owned and operated Bess Service Trucking Co. and also the Champlin Grain Elevator in rural Fairbury until he retired in 1954. Ernest Bess died in 1988 at the age of 90 in Fairbury.

World War II started when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Raymond Bess, son of Ernest and Helen Bess, grew up in Fairbury. He graduated from Fairbury Township High School in 1942. Some of his classmates included Howard Freed,

Wayne Hish, Virginia Munz, and Bob Wharton. After he finished high school, Raymond Bess worked for his father in his trucking business in Fairbury.

About 10 months after he graduated from Fairbury Township High School, Raymond Bess enlisted in the U.S. Navy on March 5, 1943. He was sent to the Great Lakes training station to complete his boot camp training.

In February 1943, the Blade reported that 10 members of the Class of 1942 were serving in the nation's armed forces during World War II. The list included Wayne Hish, Frances Scouler, Jimmy French, Van Ambrose, Francis Paternoster, Frank Merrill, Francis Winterland, Floyd Masters, Raymond Bess, and George Thomas. In a follow-up Blade article in April of 1943, the Blade published a list of 119 Fairbury men serving in World War II.

Once Raymond Bess completed his basic training at the Great Lakes training station, he was then sent to 16 weeks of training to learn how to be a naval quartermaster. In October of 1943, the Blade reported that Seaman Raymond Bess had received his orders to report at Boston, Mass., to begin training on a P. T. boat.

A P. T. (Patrol Torpedo) boat was a small, fast, and heavily armed naval vessel used by the U.S. Navy during World War II for hit-and-run attacks against larger enemy ships. Built mainly of wood to keep them lightweight and maneuverable, these boats carried torpedoes, machine guns, and sometimes small cannons. Crewed by about a dozen men, P. T. boats operated primarily in the Pacific and Mediterranean theaters, where their speed and agility made them ideal for nighttime raids, reconnaissance missions, and rescuing downed airmen.

After finishing his P. T. boat training in Massachusetts, Raymond Bess was sent by railroad to a naval base in California. He then sailed for the Pacific and arrived in the Netherlands East Indies islands (now part of the country of Indonesia) in July of 1944.

In July 1944, when Raymond Bess arrived in the Netherlands East Indies, the Pacific war had turned decisively in favor of the Allies, but brutal fighting still lay ahead. The United States and its allies were pushing westward across the Pacific, seizing key islands from Japan in a step-by-step campaign aimed at cutting Japanese supply lines and bringing bombers within range of the Japanese homeland. In this region, Allied forces were working to liberate territories Japan had conquered earlier in the war, including parts of the Netherlands East Indies, New Guinea, and the Philippines. Naval power was crucial, and small, fast craft like PT boats were used to harass Japanese shipping, support landings, conduct reconnaissance, and protect larger ships operating in narrow, island-choked waters. So Bess was entering a theater where the Allies had momentum, but where daily combat at sea and around remote islands was still intense and dangerous.

By late 1944, Japan had lost most of its experienced pilots and modern aircraft, while American ships and planes dominated the skies and seas, making conventional air attacks increasingly ineffective. In this desperate situation, Japanese leaders concluded that

suicide missions offered the best chance to inflict serious damage on heavily defended Allied ships, even with poorly trained pilots and obsolete planes. They framed these kamikaze attacks as a supreme act of sacrifice for the emperor and the nation, appealing to ideas of honor and duty to persuade young men to volunteer. As a result, when Raymond Bess was serving in the Pacific, many of the Japanese planes his ships faced were flown on one-way missions designed to trade the pilot's life for a single, devastating strike on an Allied vessel.

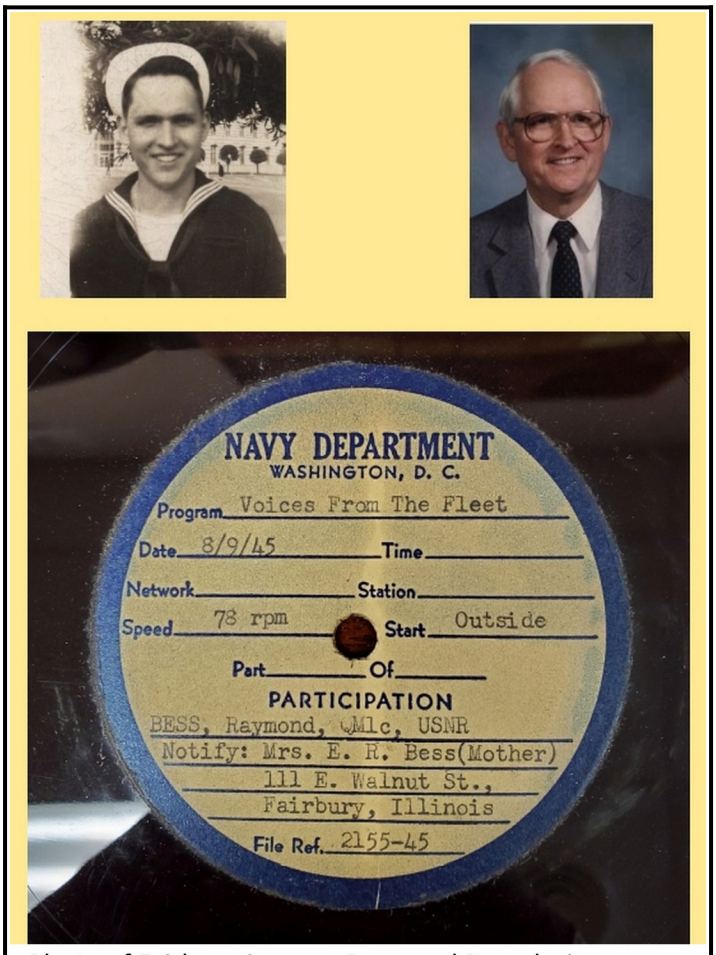

Photo of Fairbury Seaman Raymond Bess during his World War II service. Obituary photo for Raymond Bess in 2011. Record label from 1945 interview of Raymond Bess while he was serving on his PT Boat in World War II in August 1945.

On August 9, 1945, a military reporter interviewed Seaman Bess on his boat in the Pacific for the Navy Department's "Voices from the Fleet" program and recorded the interview on a 78 RPM vinyl record. The interviewer asked Raymond Bess about his scariest moment as a sailor. Raymond Bess said the worst time was when their boats were being attacked by Japanese kamikaze planes.

The total interview with Raymond Bess from Fairbury, Illinois, was just under three minutes. On the old vinyl record, it says "BESS, Raymond, Qmlc, USNR, Notify: Mrs. E. R. Bess (Mother), 111 E. Walnut St., Fairbury, Illinois." Anyone can listen to this recording at https://tinyurl.com/r3sw5m28.

Raymond Bess was discharged from the U.S Navy on February 4, 1946. Raymond lived to be 86 years of age and died in 2011. According to his obituary, Dr. Bess served on PT Boats during WWII with the U.S. Navy. He was an All-State high school football player and later served as a high school teacher, coach, counselor, principal, and Headmaster, including serving with the Dept of Defense Schools in Japan. He was also active in the Frazer Prison Ministry.

It is fascinating to listen to the 82-year-old vinyl recording of the experiences of a 20-year-old Fairbury sailor, Raymond Bess, aboard a PT boat during World War II in the Pacific Theater. Raymond Bess was one of more than 100 Fairbury men who gallantly served during World War II.